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Feminist Chronicles: A Study of Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" and "The Wedding Suit"

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ABSTRACT

This research paper contains a detailed study of Ismat Chughtai's two short stories, 'The Quilt' (1942) and 'The Wedding Suit' (1942), mainly concerning the themes of Feminism and Sexual Identity. Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) is known for her Urdu short stories, containing a hefty amount of taboo topics, such as Feminism and Homosexuality in her texts, Ismat Chughtai knew about the issues faced by women in that era and was adamant on using her writing to give a good and excessively necessary representation of and for those women who suffered a great deal at the hands of patriarchy and misogyny, one would even consider her writing bold for that time, 1900s, she talked about the topics which were often side stepped and overlooked, with incessant disregard. This research paper will briefly discuss the treatment the women were given and forced to accept, talking about homosexuality and female desire in a positive light.

Keywords: Feminism, Female identity, Treatment of Women, Taboo, Patriarchy, Misogyny, Femininity, society and homosexuality.

INTRODUCTION

About the author: Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991), born in a Uttar Pradesh, India, was gifted with a family that was both well-educated and well-off, what knicked her though was the unashamed difference between the treatment of boys and girls, she knew as she observed, women in her family weren't given the same freedom as the men in her family. Glimpses of this observation can be often seen in her short stories, originally written in the language Urdu, the portrayal of the Muslim women in her stories are just a mere part of what she has the women in her childhood endure on a daily basis. Ismat Chughtai, as a writer is noted for her straightforward and genuine writing, she was brave enough to see past the hypocritical mentality of her time and write down exactly what she observed. In that period, women, particularly Muslim women were often confined to the Zenana. Unfortunately, her talent was eclipsed by her narrative Lihaaf (The Quilt), which was panned for its rather radical premise, and everything she wrote before and after was overshadowed. Her ability to achieve what she believed in was the defining feature of her existence as a writer.

Her short stories show that she was many steps ahead of her western feminist contemporaries. She believed that women were not puppets, and her stories were a reflection of her own emotions. She challenged the stereotypes of women in literature and portrayed them as authentic individuals. She exposed the patriarchal society's hypocrisy in exploiting women through marriage and parenting. Her works "Chauthi Ka Joda" (The Wedding Suit), "Chui-Mui (Touch-me-not), and "Gharwali" (The Homemaker) explore the roles of women in marriage given by the society.

Ismat Chughtai's writing removes the veils of sexuality from women's identities, revealing them in their true human selves. Her styles and ideas are bold and rebellious. Ismat Chughtai's Stories exemplify her rebellious nature, with characters that reflect her personality, making them Distinctive. Her stories may not seem so ground breaking to modern readers, but they were

Relevant at the time they were written. She revealed a woman who had suffered for a long time And had learned to value and embrace her femininity.

Her literary works: Ismat Chughtai, a well-known Urdu writer, has an extensive body of work that includes short tales, novels, and essays. The following are some of her major works and their publication years:

Novels: Ziddi (Stubborn) (1941), Terhi Lakeer (The Crooked Line) (1943), Ajeeb Aadmi (Strange Man) (1967), Dil Ki Duniya (The World Of The Heart) (1958), Saudai (The Madman) (1952), Masooma (The Innocent) (1972), Jangli Kabootar (Wild Pigeons) (1959), Ek

Qatra-e-Khoon (A Drop of Blood) (1976).

Short stories: Lihaaf (The Quilt) (1942), Chauthi ka Joda (The Wedding Suit) (1948), Gharwali (The Homemaker) (1941), Do Haath (Two Hands) (1941), Kallu (Kallu) (1941), Gainda (The

Daisies) (1950), Nahni Ki Nani (Nahni's Grandmother) (1943), Badan ki Khushboo (The Scent of The Body) (1954), Bichu Phupi (Aunt Bichu) (1954), Neera (1956).

Essays: Dozakhi (1942), Ek Baat (A word) (1944), Tedhi Lakeer (The Crooked Line) (1945), Til (The Mole) (1948).

Autobiographical Works: Kaghazi Hai Pairahan (The Paper-thin Garment) (1979).

Plays: Fasaadi (The troublemaker) (1948).

In exchange for her literary efforts, Ismat Chughtai earned numerous awards and prizes from both government and non-government organizations. The government of India honored her with Padma Shri award in 1975. She received the Iqbal Samman, Ghalib Award and Filmfare Award from the Madhya Pradesh government in 1990. After dazzling the sphere of writing for half a century, she passed away on October 24, 1991, and her remains was cremated at Chandwani Electric Crematorium, as per her will.

Feminism: Feminism is a social and political movement that advocates for women's rights on the basis of political, social and economic equality with men. It strives to address the systematic disparities that women endure as a result of patriarchal structures, as well as to attain gender equality. Feminism encompasses a wide range of ideologies and movements, including liberal feminism, radical feminism, intersectional feminism, and others, all of which address distinct aspects of women's experiences and challenges.

Ismat Chughtai as a feminist writer:

One of her most famous works, the short story "Lihaaf" (The Quilt), published in 1942, displays her feminist views. "Lihaaf" discusses women's repressed sexual impulses, shining light on previously forbidden topics such as homosexuality. Despite severe criticism and legal problems, the story remains a crucial piece in feminist fiction because of its daring portrayal of women's sexuality and agency.

"Chauthi Ka Joda" (The Wedding Suit), a short story by Ismat Chughtai, is another important work that embodies feminist ideas. This novel digs into the societal and familial forces that shape women's life, with a special emphasis on the institution of marriage and the rituals that accompany it.

Lihaaf (The Quilt): A Feminist Study

Ismat Chughtai's "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) is a major work in Urdu literature that bravely explores issues of female sexuality and the limits imposed by patriarchal society. Written in 1942, the story sparked outrage due to its graphic language and daring representation of lesbianism, leading to Chughtai being charged with obscenity. Despite its scandalous appearance, "Lihaaf" is a powerful feminist book that criticizes oppressive structures that suppress women's wants and identities.

The story is told by a young girl who is sent to live with her aunt, Begum Jaan, while her mother is gone. Begum Jaan is married to Nawab Sahib, a wealthy and powerful man who is more concerned with his male companions than with his wife. Begum Jaan, neglected and lonely, develops an intimate relationship with her maid, Rabbo, which the narrator finds through the titular quilt's suggestive movements.

Chughtai's portrayal of Begum Jaan's situation is a powerful indictment on the sexual restriction and emotional neglect that many women face in patriarchal settings. Begum Jaan's marriage is a sham; her husband marries to meet cultural expectations but does not involve her emotionally or sexually. Begum Jaan's neglect causes her to seek solace and friendship with Rabbo, emphasizing the human desire for closeness and affection.

The quilt in the story acts as a powerful symbol. On one level, it symbolizes the secrecy and hiding of women's sexual urges. Begum Jaan's relationship with Rabbo must be concealed under layers of metaphor and innuendo, mirroring the larger societal taboo against female sexuality and non-heteronormative partnerships. The narrator's observations of the quilt's undulating movements hint at a forbidden world beneath the surface, one that is both captivating and scandalous.

Chughtai's portrayal of Begum Jaan's sexuality is innovative, especially given the milieu of 1940s India. The story reveals a society's hypocrisy in suppressing female desire while allowing male promiscuity. The story begins with the words, "When people talked about the Nawab Sahib, they only spoke about the boys," implying that Nawab Sahib's inclinations are well known, whereas Begum Jaan's wishes are kept hidden and taboo.

Chughtai's storytelling method in "Lihaaf" is very important. She enriches the story with layers of purity and inquiry by telling it from the perspective of a child. The young narrator is unable to completely comprehend what she is witnessing, allowing Chughtai to explore mature topics indirectly. This narrative decision further emphasizes the idea that repressing feminine sexuality is a taught trait that society enforces from an early age.

"Lihaaf" disrupts established gender stereotypes by portraying Begum Jaan as a multidimensional heroine with her own aspirations and demands. Begum Jaan, in her husband's absence, takes charge of her sexuality, albeit clandestinely. This act of agency is a type of opposition to the patriarchal order, which aims to keep her subservient and invisible. Chughtai claims through Begum Jaan that women's sexual needs are natural and acceptable, and they deserve to be acknowledged and fulfilled.

The novel also examines the power dynamics that underpin servant-master relationships. Rabbo, while being a maid, wields considerable power over Begum Jaan due to their close friendship.

This reversal of power dynamics is significant in a culture where class and social position govern relationships. Chughtai contends that intimacy and emotional connection can cross these barriers, upsetting the strict hierarchies that govern social interactions.

“Lihaaf” sparked debate not only for its content but also for its ramifications. Chughtai broke a big taboo by writing about lesbian desire, challenging the heteronormative framework that shapes society conceptions of sexuality. Her depiction of Begum Jaan and Rabbo’s connection is about more than just sexual fulfillment; it is about women’s fundamental desire for emotional and physical intimacy, which the patriarchal framework of marriage frequently fails to meet.

Chughtai’s work anticipates later feminist discourses that criticize marriage as a source of patriarchal control. By emphasizing Begum Jaan’s emotional and sexual neglect, Chughtai challenges cultural conventions that promote male fulfillment over female submission. “Lihaaf” implies that women’s connections with one another can provide an alternate source of support and fulfillment, which is a novel concept in a society that values male-female interactions.

“Lihaaf” is a pioneering feminist work that questions traditional standards about female sexuality and the institution of marriage. Ismat Chughtai’s portrayal of Begum Jaan’s suppressed aspirations and illicit relationship with Rabbo is a strong critique of patriarchal norms that limit women. “Lihaaf” remains an important work in feminist literature, pushing readers to reassess how society interprets and regulates women’s bodies and wants.

Chauthi ka Joda (The Wedding Suit): A Feminist analysis

Ismat Chughtai’s “Chauthi ka Joda” (The Wedding Suit) is a profound examination of the societal constraints on women, particularly in the setting of marriage. Chughtai uses Champa’s tragic destiny to criticize the patriarchal systems that define and frequently limit women’s lives, aspirations, and identities. This analysis will go into the story’s feminist themes, using actual excerpts from the book.

The wedding suit, or “chauthi ka joda,” is a major symbol in the novel, expressing not just societal expectations of marriage, but also the protagonist, Champa’s personal goals and wishes. The elaborate preparations for the wedding suit illustrate how important marriage is in women’s lives. Chughtai puts it this way: “*Champa had chosen the best fabric for her wedding suit, dreaming of the admiration it would draw.*”

This paragraph explains how cultural expectations shape women’s identities and worth based on their marital status. The wedding suit represents the pressures women face to conform to traditional roles, as well as how their individual desires are frequently overshadowed by societal expectations.

Champa’s narrative clearly depicts the tension between personal ambitions and society expectations. The story takes a terrible turn when Champa becomes ill and dies just before her wedding. Her death serves as a sharp reminder of the physical and emotional toll of complying to society conventions. Chughtai explains the family’s reaction: “*They mourned not just for Champa, but for the dream that had died with her.*”

This quotation highlights the weight of societal expectations on women, as well as the deeply held cultural notion that a woman’s primary purpose is to fulfill her position as a wife. Champa’s death thus represents the harmful consequence of these demands, implying that the quest of societal acceptability can result in the loss of personal identity and goals.

Chughtai’s description of Champa’s upcoming marriage provides a critical perspective on the institution of marriage. The meticulous preparations and large investment in the wedding attire highlight the commercial character of marriage in a patriarchal setting. Chughtai gently criticizes this with the material concentration on the wedding suit, which becomes an item of great importance, overshadowing Champa’s uniqueness.

The novel also explores the economic and social implications of marriage, emphasizing how women’s worth is frequently linked to their marital status and the dowry they bring. Chughtai states: “*The wedding suit was a testament to the family’s honor and their daughter’s worth.*” This phrase embodies society’s belief that a woman’s value is inextricably related to her role inside the marriage framework, reducing her to a symbol of familial honor and social standing.

Role of female characters: The other female characters in the novel, particularly Champa’s mother and sisters, play important roles in upholding these societal norms, even though they are also constrained by them. They enthusiastically participate in the wedding preparations, stressing the significance of the occasion. Chughtai writes: “*Her mother and sisters worked tirelessly, their hands moving with a rhythm born of tradition and duty.*”

This illustration demonstrates how women frequently become enforcers of the same standards that oppress them, perpetuating patriarchal beliefs over generations. Chughtai’s nuanced portrayal of these people highlights the complexities of their roles within the socioeconomic structure, as both victims and perpetrators of patriarchy.

One of Chughtai’s most captivating storytelling elements is her ability to depict her characters’ silent pain and unsaid desires. Champa’s inner world, hopes, and dreams are mainly unspoken, reflecting a larger social tendency to repress women’s voices. Chughtai says, “*Champa’s eyes sparkled with dreams she never dared to speak.*”

This phrase captures the subject of unspoken wants and emotional suppression faced by women. Chughtai’s narrative style, which is rich in unstated emotions and concealed anguish, encourages readers to analyze the psychological impact of societal expectations on women’s lives.

“Chauthi ka Joda” is a powerful feminist text that criticizes the cultural expectations and restrictions that limit women’s freedom. Ismat Chughtai’s depiction of Champa’s unfortunate destiny is a moving reminder of the human cost of these repressive buildings. Chughtai’s sensitive and perceptive novel calls for a rethinking of how society views and values women, encouraging readers to notice and fight the constraints placed on women’s life. The

narrative remains an important contribution to feminist writing, demonstrating Chughtai's work's continuous relevance in the fight for gender equality and women's rights.

Conclusion

To summarize, Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" and "The Wedding Suit" are forceful literary critiques of society standards, notably those concerning gender and class in mid-century India. Both stories showcase Chughtai's trademark candor and careful observation of human behavior, delving into topics of suppression, desire, and social hypocrisy.

Through the narrator's innocent yet perceptive eyes, Chughtai exposes the complexities of human relationships and the unspoken desires that lie beneath the surface of respectable society. The story's controversial subject matter, particularly its depiction of a lesbian relationship, challenged the taboos of its time and highlighted the need for a more honest discourse on sexuality. "The Quilt" stands out for its candid exploration of female sexuality and the suffocating confines of traditional roles assigned to women.

On the other hand, "The Wedding Suit" is a moving look at the junction of class and ambition. The plot concentrates around a young girl's yearning for a new suit for her brother's wedding, which represents her aspirations for social advancement and acceptance. Chughtai expertly depicts the lower-middle class's economic problems and societal constraints, emphasizing the inequities and sometimes invisible labor of women in preserving familial respect and dignity.

Both pieces demonstrate Chughtai's skill in weaving social satire into rich, realistic human representations. Her protagonists, generally women, are presented with depth and sensitivity, emphasizing their perseverance and agency in the face of harsh situations. Chughtai's work is both entertaining and thought-provoking, pushing readers to question and reflect on the cultural institutions that shape their lives.

Finally, Chughtai's works are still relevant today because they unapologetically explore subjects that appeal across generations. Her stories demonstrate literature's persistent potential to question society conventions and offer voice to individuals who are ignored in dominant narratives.

Through "The Quilt" and "The Wedding Suit," Chughtai has carved out a space for nuanced conversations on gender, sexuality, and class, cementing her legacy as a pioneering feminist writer in Urdu literature.

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